

Destruction of Balance

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Summary: A year after Halo 3 two ships go missing orbiting a strange planet. The Arbiter teams up with the mysterious woman Kassie to discover the reason behind the strange disappearance. Is there perhaps a new enemy? And is the flood really gone? MCxCortana

R&R

## 1. Prologue: The Missing

\*\*Summary: \*\*It's been a year since the end of the war between Covenant and Humans. The flood have dissapeared and the Elites are free to travel back home. But relations between Humans and Elites are kept open by the Arbiter though prejudice on both sides are high. Elites think the humans are travelling too far into their territory for new worlds, humans want nothing to do with the monstrous aliens. But when a human ship and Elite ship dissapear in the same location the two species are forced to team up to discover the mystery of the planet the two ships had been orbiting. What new enemy has arrived? Who is the mysterious Kassie? And are the Flood really gone?

Read to find out.

\*\*Author's Note:\*\* This is based off of Halo. Simply based. No AU or following the plotline of the games point for point. That's too boring. Plus, though I have read four of the five Halo books and played all three games, I am bound to get something wrong. So, to cover my arse, I'm telling you this is based off of Halo. This is probably going to end up having a fantasy edge to it because I'm not really a SciFi writer. And some major Halo details may be changed on a whim. Deal with it. If you want a fanatical Haloverse detailed fanfic go somewhere else.

\*\*Disclaimer\*\*: I do not own Halo or the Covenant or the listed characters that show up right off the back. Nor do I possibly own the Arbiter though that would be kind of cool since he is my favorite character. However the mysterious diembodied voices, the commander, Private Bradwr, and the other nameless privates do belong to me. So

does the title and plot.

\*\*Destruction of Balance\*\*

\_Spartan-117: MIA\_

\_AI Construct Cortana: MIA\_

\_Sergeant Major Avery J. Johnson: KIA\_

\_Commander Miranda Keyes: KIA\_

\_Prophet of Truth: KIA\_

\_343 Guilty Sparks: KIA\_

\_The Gravemind: MIA\_

"\_A steep priceâ€|" \_

"\_Yes. But the war is only just beginningâ€|" \_

Prologue: The Missing

"Commanderâ€| I'm picking up a distress beacon."

The private stared at the screen wide eyed before reaching up with shaking fingers to take off his head set. He swung his seat around the stare at the broad shouldered man that had paused behind the private's terminal.

"Sir, this beacon is a year old! There is no way anybody could have survived out here this long," said the private, feeling like a yammering idiot. He cleared his throat. "Besides, Commander, humans haven't even come out this far before now."

The commander clutched his hands behind his back, his brow furrowed and sloping over his eyes more than usual. After a minute he turned away from the private and walked back over to his own seat.

"Can anybody prove or disprove what Private Bradwr just told us?" asked the commander, turning his attention to everybody on the bridge.

"I'mâ€| I'm reading a human life sign, sir," said one woman. "On the planet where the beacon is originating from."

"Impossibleâ€|" muttered Bradwr, rubbing a hand against his forehead. All he wanted to do was to go home. But for his mother's sake he went on stupid little missions like these, did some readings, and then turned back around to Earth to pay her bills. Right about now he sort of wished that the crabby old lady would just die already. Or that she had been killed by the Covenant back when the war was going on. That would have made his life so much more easy.

"Elite ship pulling out of slip space, Commander," announced another man. "They want to know why we stopped."

"Put them through," sighed the commander, leaning back in his seat.

The man turned back to his terminal hitting a few key buttons. Just as he was turning back around something rocked the ship and red lights blinked and flashed at several different terminals.

"What hit us?" cried the commander, jumping to his feet, face starting to go red. Before he could say another word the ship was hit again and the commander was thrown up into the air, landing heavily on his neck. Bradwr cringed, looking away while clutching at his terminal.

\_I don't want to die; I don't want to dieâ€\_|\_ he thought desperately, squeezing his eyes shut.

"The engines were knocked out!" somebody cried.

"Can anybody tell what's hitting us?" somebody else said, trying to keep some calm.

"\_Something\_ is shooting, obviously," said a dry voice.

"The Covenant?"

"We've been peaceful with the Elites for a year now!"

"Maybe we found something they don't want us to find."

"Maybe!" shouted Bradwr, spinning back around. "We should try and get out of here!"

Everyone turned and stared at him for a moment. It seemed so stupid that after only just a year everybody had forgotten what it was like to be at war. Something was shooting. You either shot back or got the fuck away. Not stand around and act stupid. Like these morons were.

"We can't," said a quiet voice. "Our engines are outâ€\_| Better start launching lifeboats. This baby's going to crash."

A woman sighed, slowly and carefully getting to her feet. "Is there anyway to safely crash the ship?"

"I don't know if anybody would survive, ma'amâ€\_|"

"Fine," said the woman, her face stony grey and grim. "Start abandoning the ship. Somebody set up our own distress beacon. Grab as many supplies as you can on your way out. Who knows how long we'll be out hereâ€\_|"

Bradwr groaned, turning back to his terminal and setting up the distress beacon and sending out the orders, not trusting any of the others to do so. When everything was set he unstrapped himself from his seat, banging his head against the wall.

He \_did not\_ sign up for this.

## 2. Chapter 1: Kassie

\*\*Author's Note: \*\*This is sort of just an introduction chapter to a

whole bunch of character, most of which are mine. Only the Arbiter and Rtar'Vadumee (I looked it up, it seriously is his name) belong to Halo. And the UNSC and Helljumpers. But the characters are mine. (Okay, so I've just done my disclaimer as well). Not much I'm really willing to say before I start out. There might be a few mistakes, especially when it comes to military crap like that. Please forgive me. I'm a simple high school student that happens to like Halo and writing.

## Chapter One: Kassie

"I don't care, Vice Admiral! I don't want those things on my base!"

Vice Admiral Paul Macarthur clenched and unclenched his hands several times behind his back. The man before him was a good four inches shorter than him but had a way of bearing down on anybody that crossed him. Being a great deal hot headed, many things crossed Brigadier General Max Stover. Including, it seemed, the presence of the now allied Elites, former members of the broken Covenant.

"Now, you tell those scaly monsters there ain't any room, you hear?" sneered Stover, his round face red and his jaw trembling. Though in the year since the war had ended many soldiers had let themselves go, Stover was not an obese man. He had simply always been round. But those that had known him long also knew Stover was very much in shape and his large chest was thus through large bone structure and decades of working out. There were many that Stover towered over and scrutinized his with beady, black eyes. Macarthur just happened to be one of the lucky few blessed with the tall gene.

"Is that any way to treat The Arbiter himself?" sighed Macarthur, keeping himself standing tall. His back, despite arthritis, was held straight. He was not an unimposing man himself. Even his now grey hair gave him a sort of severity. However he kept his wrinkling face clean shaven, giving his features a sort of grandfatherly warmth. On top of that he was known to twitch, especially when nervous. That was why he kept his hands clasped behind his back. "Admiral Bartley has given you a command, General. If you have a complaint, you can bring it to him. I'm not a messenger, Stover. I have my own purposes for being here."

Stover's beady black eyes narrowed and one meaty hand reached up to pull at his dark mustache. Finally he snorted in compliance and stomped off, leaving Macarthur to sigh in relief.

The ODSTs were a worrisome lot now that the fighting had come to a close. It really was all politics and cleaning up the mess these days. People like Macarthur were the new heroes, not the young and the fit. The Helljumpers as they were usually called were a group of the fastest, strongest, and craziest marines the UNSC could find. That made them hard to deal with when there was nothing productive for them to channel their energies toward.

But it also made their bases the most neutral in the galaxy. At least, the most neutral that both UNSC and the Elites could agree on. Helljumpers hardly paid attention the chain of command anymore except for in their own groups. Stover was a perfect example of this. Orders signed by the Admiral himself bore little in the way of binding when it came to the Helljumpers. There was no way to force them to do

anything. Unless there was something to shoot.

Which, if Macarthur was right, there might actually be. Whether Covenant, Flood, or some sort of new enemy he had no way of knowing. Not yet. Which was why he was here.

"\_Covenant Cruiser in bound, sir\_.\_" came the crackling message through Macarthur's comm. \_"They're asking for permission to land their Phantoms inside the trees."\_

"Understood," said Macarthur, pressing the small microphone in his ear. "Tell them permission is granted. I will meet the Arbiter and his entourage just outside the base."

"\_Very good, sir. Over and out\_.\_"

The comm. clicked off leaving Macarthur standing in the cold concrete walkways of the ODST barracks. He ran a shaking, bony hand across his chin feeling the already growing white bristle of his beard. The Admiral would not be here for another day. He had business on New Reach and had asked Macarthur to keep the Arbiter busy for the intervening time. Macarthur, however, had his own reasons for seeing the Arbiter.

"Would you like your own escort, sir?"

Macarthur dropped his hand to his side. The voice had been deep but at the same time entirely feminine. The woman held the marks of a Lieutenant Colonel on the collar of her uniform which did not to accentuate her female curves. Her calloused, tanned hands rested on his hips just above the holsters for M6D pistols. Small, red, round lips held neutrally on her face, one slender eyebrow quirked questioningly. The dark brown hair on her head was, by regulation, buzzed save for one strand tied in a braid. The beautiful vestige of her once long, silky hair.

But it was the eyes, really, that held Macarthur. He was a fairly old man, he knew that. And he was happily married with three children, and the same number of grandchildren. That still didn't stop him from falling in love with the woman in front of him. Despite the smoothness of her face that proved she could be nothing more than twenty-six, her eyes made her seem so much older. They were deep and dark, but not in the same cold way Stover's were.

Her eyes spoke of ancient legends, buried secrets, and dusty tombs filled with great men Macarthur would never meet. And she, those eyes told him, had seem them allâ€|

"Sir?"

"Sorry, Lt. Colonel," said Macarthur, rubbing his chin and mouth again. He reminded him forcibly that she was young, despite her rank. And as soon as he did he could hardly believe he had ever fancied being in love with her. There was only one woman he loved and he was, thank god, married to her! "It's been a while since I've been close to an Elite. Mentally preparing myself."

"I have the opposite problem, sir," said the woman, his mouth twitching in a smile. "Got to mentally prepare myself not to follow my instinct to shoot their heads off."

Looking at her slight body Macarthur found it hard to believe she had ever fought against an Elite in her life, let alone held a gun. The holsters, he felt, had to be for show. And thus, so was the comment. Probably a common joke around marine barracks. Though probably the Helljumpers had much nastier ones.

Then, remembering where he was, Macarthur actually did believe this young woman had seen her fair share of fights. In fact, upon further inspection, he noticed the scar across the woman's face. It started at the bridge of her nose, just below her right eye and continued diagonally down to her jaw, and back out of sight along her neck. It was disguised, just barely, as a black tattoo that had started to fade. It gave her a much fiercer impression and put her quite at home in the ODSTs.

"Well, if you think you can manage it," said Macarthur, turning to exit the barracks, "I would greatly enjoy an escort."

"For the company or the support, sir?" asked the woman. Her voice was a little thick, like she had some sort of accent. But it wasn't any accent Macarthur had ever heard before. It was maybe Australian with just a hint of French, or even German. It was hard to get a handle.

"I'm married," chuckled Macarthur, remembering his past thoughts.

A dark smile passed the woman's face. "That's what they all tell me. Name's Kassie, sir."

"Paul Macarthur."

He spared the woman a rather anxious look just before stepping through the doors and onto the springy grass ground. Lorentia was one of the newest human planets, adding to the neutrality of the place. It was about planets that the Admiral and the Arbiter planned to negotiate. Both species had their own ideas of what they needed and how much space was required. The pesky aliens demanded a bit too much, Macarthur thought, considering how many planets the Covenant had destroyed themselves.

"I feel a bit sorry for the Arbiter," Kassie piped up. "After all, he quite respects humans and wants to do everything in his power to help them. But with prejudice on both sides of the fields he finds it hard to find the right compromise."

For just a second Macarthur was on the verge of correcting Kassie by saying "Don't you mean to help us?" But then he stopped. It didn't seem like the appropriate thing to say. The words as she said them with that low, female, thickly accented voice were entirely correct.

Perhaps, in his old age, Macarthur was going mad.

"We'll see how well the Arbiter handles this next meeting," sighed Macarthur picking at the cuticles on his thumbs. It was a bad habit he had had since the age of four and had never found a way of stopping. He'd simply been able to practice shooting, instead, to keep his fingers from bleeding.

"Yes," said Kassie, picking up her pace as three Elites stepped out of the shadow of the giant conifer trees. "But the Admiral's or yours?"

Macarthur nearly froze before catching himself. The Arbiter, obvious in his almost medieval type grey armour, had strode forward, offering his hand to the Vice Admiral. It was with a little hesitancy that Macarthur shook the three fingered hand, looking up into the alien face.

Sangheili, more commonly referred to as Elites, stood at about eight feet tall, perhaps nine at times. Most of that seemed to be legs with knees that bent, taking half a foot away from their height. But despite that the creatures were still imposing, including the fact that their mouths consisted of four mandibles. It took some getting use to, holding a conversation with an Elite, and even then watching their mouths move was still eerie and nauseating.

"I have brought with me Rtas'Vadumee, my second in command," said the Arbiter, sweeping a hand at an Elite with half his jaws missing. Macarthur's stomach made a hard lurch at that and the brightly shining special ops silver armour the Elite wore. The third seemed to be nothing more than a foot soldier, wearing the standard blue armour and standing a good foot shorter than the older Elites. "I hope that in this way negotiations might go faster."

"That's my hope as well but I will not say the same for the Admiral," said Macarthur, wincing as he said the words. Though Stover might get away with disrespect without batting an eyelash, Macarthur had been raised since a fetus on so much respect he took it with his porridge every morning and with a hard drink just before bed. There were still a few scars from the "lectures" on respect his father used to give him. So even now, well past middle-age and considered almost elderly, Macarthur chewed on his tongue whenever disrespect passed his lips. As much as an asshole as Bartley might be, he was still Macarthur's superior officer and deserved Macarthur's \_respect\_.

"Admiral Bartley is a very powerful man," said the Arbiter, nodding his head slowly. "Very commanding. But I don't think he really has anybody's interest but his own in mind."

"He has his moments," said Kassie, shrugging. "Every sentient being does."

"You did not know the Prophet of Truth, then," said the Arbiter, seeming undisturbed at being spoken to by this woman. "He was pure selfishness."

"Perhaps after he became a Prophet."

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Kassieâ€œ!" Macarthur jumped in, wishing he knew a bit more about his companion than a rank and a first name.

"Lark," Kassie added. "Just Lieutenant Colonel Lark." She eyed Macarthur for just a small moment, a haunting smile on her red lips. Then she reached out and shook every Elite's hand in turn. The young blue Elite seemed a bit surprised but did not back down.

"I'm sorry," said Macarthur, stepping back. "Where are my manners?

"Would you like to come inside?"

"We would be honored," said the Arbiter, putting a hand on his chest and bowing slightly.

"All weapons must be left outside," said Kassie. "As you can see all personnel inside the building have already locked away their weapons."

Macarthur raised an eyebrow at her. It had been only moments ago that he had told Stover that the Elites were coming, knowing full well there would be an argument. How the ODSTS had locked away all their weapons already was baffling even to him? But he trusted Kassie not to lie to their guests and grimly led the Elite trio into the barracks. The blue Elite was left outside with the weapons, no arguments given by the aliens. Kassie had Vadumee in a long winded conversation on weapons, including the famed Elite Energy Sword.

"It seems like a very empty place here," noted the Arbiter. "I've been to other worlds and there are usually more humans around."

"We've only just begun to settle here," said Macarthur, though he too had begun to notice the lack of human presence. "There are few people here and those that had travelled this far are not to fond of Elites or the UNSC."

"Are they not of your troops?" asked Vadumee, cutting off his conversation with Kassie.

"Were you not part of the Covenant?" asked Kassie, not missing a beat or seemingly at all insulted at having her prior conversation cut off. "How fond were you of them?"

"Point well taken," said the Arbiter. "But is it the UNSC in general you are not fond of or your Admiral Bartley."

"I think that is quite enough," said Macarthur, clearing his throat even as his voice cracked. Any further and he might just hang himself for being a traitor. Perhaps his father had taught him too wellâ€!

The rest of the afternoon was passed showing the two high ranking Elites around the base. Everywhere they went only one of two Helljumpers were passed. Kassie made no eye contact of any of them and none of them showed any signs of recognition. In fact for the amount of notice they gave her Macarthur almost would have thought they believed he had brought Kassie with him.

The computer room was of particular interest of Vadumee particularly who had little dealings with human AIs. Kassie was very patient with him, explaining in layman's terms everything she possibly could. Since the Arbiter also listened with growing respect Macarthur was given another opportunity to simply watch her. Every question she was asked she answered but never as if she just simply knew all answers. Nothing surprised her about the Elites or any mention they made to obscure Covenant ideas.

In fact she asked no questions at all. Merely said the right things so, it seemed, Vadumee would explain precisely what she already

knew.

"The Vice Admiral and I will sit down to an early supper," said the Arbiter in a small lull in the conversation. Kassie only blinked once before shining a wonderful smile at the Elite. The Arbiter did, at that point, seem slightly taken aback, going slightly slack jawed. Vadumee was only just coming to his senses as this happened, blinking his eyes out of some sort of daze.

\_She has that sort of effect,\_ thought Macarthur, chewing at his lip.  
\_Do all manner of men, even alien, simply love her when she looks at them like that?\_

"You two may continue," finished the Arbiter, acting as though he had never stopped speaking. And by the way Kassie and Vadumee acted, he may not have stopped speaking. Macarthur, even, found it difficult to judge the amount of time that might have elapsed.

Perhaps none did at all.

Ensconced in the mess hall, a green salad sitting in front of both aliens, Macarthur found he was breathing easily again. When he had ever stopped breathing this easily was lost on him. But the Arbiter seemed to feel the same.

"A strange woman you have, Vice Admiral," he commented, his eyes fixed on the door to the mess hall. "Never, in all the years we've been at war with humans, have I seen a scar like that."

"I've only just met her today," admitted Macarthur, taking a small bite of the green salad. It was made of the nutrition filled plants of Luctia but it tasted a bit like sour milk. But military food had never really tasted great.

"Vadumee seems very taken with her," the Arbiter commented, chewing at some of the leaf himself.

Macarthur choked on a glass of water at the Arbiter's observation and was also, thankfully, able to look away from the Elite eating. The mandibles had to hold on to the food all the way to the throat since the alien mouths had no bottom to them. Watching a man eat with his mouth open was half way similar to watching an Elite eat.

"I didn't realizeâ€| Can Elitesâ€| aren't there femaleâ€|" Macarthur cut himself off with more coughs and picking insistently at one of his cuticles until it did bleed. "She is very beautiful," he added lamely.

"You mistake me," said the Arbiter, though he did not seem at all surprised by Macarthur's behavior. "If I thought \_that\_ was Vadumee's intention he would not be allowed alone with her. He may take her as a student, though. Which might help relations."

"Ah," said Macarthur, sighing with relief.

"Though if that happened \_I'd\_ have to be very careful not to be alone with her myself," the Arbiter continued, before quietly eating the rest of his salad.

"Oh."

Feeling rather pale and utterly out of words, Macarthur pushed his salad away. Relations with the Elites might be becoming better thanks to Kassie but it was making Macarthur's stomach churn.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Note: <strong>Obviously a whole lot isn't really known about Elites so I sort of took artistic liberty and made stuff up. Like I've told others, I am a freak when it comes to Halo romance. But hey, I'm sure there are plenty of MC/Cortana babies popping up around the Haloverse fandom. I've just sort of go the other way: somebody with the Arbiter. But I love the Arbiter! He is my favorite character. And is voice is just dead sexy. I don't see race. I judge hotness by voice. nods But it was also fun to think about an Elite eating. We never find out if they have to eat something special and judging by pictures it would only really be difficult for them to consume liquids. I figured a salad wasn't too dangerous. Things to really start in the next chapter so please stay patient with me.

### 3. Chapter 2: Team Lark

\*\*Author's Note: \*\*Wow, this is a REALLY long chapter, guys. I really didn't mean to. At first it was going to be too short so I stepped away from it and when I came back I had a whole flood of ideas. Not all of them fit into this chapter so they're going to have to be put in the next. And you get introductions to a whole cast of characters. Hopefully none of them sound clichÃ©. Some of these I've had for nine years, so be nice. In fact, of all my characters in this fanfic only Kassie is fairly new. Enjoy!

\*\*Disclaimer:\*\* I don't own Halo or the Elitesâ€¦ or the Flood. But, damnit, I do own Fred Dugan, Marie Kellogg, Acea Buchanan, and Juliana Montoya. And all the other characters that you've already seen before so I don't need to name. And the story is mine even if it would only be possible because of the Haloverseâ€¦ but oh well!

#### Chapter Two: Team Lark

It felt like he was back on one of the Halos. Minus the Flood.

But the Arbiter still could not stand the cold silence of the human base, or the echoing of metal and concrete. Even after sitting in the mess hall for two and a half hours he saw maybe two other humans other than the Vice Admiral and Lt. Colonel. Noticing the awkwardness Vadumee invited the young Srac'Tashnn to join them for supper. Though the young Sangheili kept his composure well, the Arbiter could tell he was relieved not to be left outside in the dark.

"I don't see why you couldn't at least hold on to your sidearms," Lt. Colonel Lark conceded at this new arrangement. "After all you are outnumbered."

"Not that anybody would think of attacking you," Vice Admiral Macarthur added, casting the woman a piercing glance with his grey eyes.

The man was one of the tallest the Arbiter had ever met, except for the one they had called the Master Chief. But despite Macarthur's height and composure he was still liable to fidget and his face stayed pallid all day long.

Well after the sun had set outside and the small group had moved to the Sangheili's quarters, a young soldier approached the Vice Admiral. The boy gave the Sangheili a wary glance before muttering in Macarthur's ear. When the man gave a nod the soldier left the room in a great hurry, not even bothering to close the door behind him.

"Apparently Admiral Bartley will not grace us with his presence tomorrow," said Macarthur stiffly. The Arbiter had noticed the man chose never to say anything that might be considered disrespectful. But when it came to the Admiral " not one of the Arbiter's favorite humans " Macarthur became twitchier than usual. Almost as if fighting between lying and being disrespectful.

The Arbiter didn't blame him in the least.

"Doesn't bother me, sir," said Lark, twirling Tashnn's plasma pistol on her pointer finger a few times. She then handed it back with her stunning smile that did little faze Tashnn.

The Arbiter, on the other hand, forced his eyes away lest his thoughts run away from him. He completely understood the Vice Admiral's uncertainty, confusion, and " dare he say it " uncomfortableness with the idea of a human with a Sangheili. The Arbiter was too, truth be told. It had never been done before. Sangheili mated only with other Sangheili. In his years with the humans the Arbiter had learned that they had a permanent bonding ceremony called "marriage."

Up until now the idea seemed entirely insane to the Arbiter. Good fighting genes could not pass through a species if one was stuck to only a single mating partner. Having met Lark, however, the Arbiter believed he understood some of the other reasons for marriage.

"Well I think it's damn rude," snapped Macarthur. "He doesn't like to be kept waiting and here he's refusing to see the Arbiter for two days straight!"

The man's face had turned a slight shade of red, something the Arbiter had become accostomed to only after much repetition. Watching humans turn different colors was interesting to say the least. Almost disconcerting if the Arbiter had not seen it happen so many times. But he found it easier to read human emotions because of it, where as the Sangheili were harder to read.

"Yeah, but if I remember correctly," said Lark, laying out on one of the beds, her boots resting half way up the wall. "You told Stover you had your own purposes for being here!"

Macarthur's hand flew to his mouth as if to hold it shut. Every single Sangheili was not very interested in the Vice Admiral after this comment and Macarthur seemed to know it. He glowered for a moment slightly above the toes of Lark's shoes while she hummed and smiled at the ceiling. Vadumee silently set the plasma rifle he had been cleaning to the side.

"Perhaps you've heard about what has happened near the planet we've dubbed Jove," started Macarthur, clearing his throat repeatedly. He placed his shaking hands in his lap palms up, turning his attention slightly past the Arbiter's shoulder. "One of our ships, The Singing Lark, was out collecting samples when it dissapeared."

"Yes, one of our ships were there as well," Vadumee said, his hands clutched between his knees. He was perched on one of the bedside tables in the room. And quite comfortably, too. "They had just been trying to hail your ship when something fired. We lost the signal soon afterwards."

The Arbiter watched Vadumee for a long time. But his second in comand did not offer any more information to the humans. The ship that had gone missing had been made top secret by the Arbiter nearly a year ago. It was classified not only from the humans but from most of the Sangheili. Only Vadumee and the Sangheili on board the ship knew of its purpose.

"We are doing what we can to recover the Morning Cloud," the Arbiter said, meaning to shut down the conversation.

"That's the thing," said Macarthur, clenching his hands in his lap. "You're the only ones with the resources to spare that could visit Jove. I'm not all that interested in searching for a destroyed ship and more than likely dead crew. What I want to know about is that planet."

"And you wish for us to aid you in this search for knowledge," said the Arbiter, stiffening. It was the sort of arrogant thing he had been warned humans would do. They assumed that though they may not have the same technology as, say, the Sangheili others would be more than happy to share.

"I ask only that you take us along," said Macarthur. "A small group of men I trust, nothing more. We'll help you uncover your ship and if we learn about Jove along the way all the better for us."

"Ah."

The Arbiter felt a certain amount of relief wash over him. Humans helping the Sangheili to rescue their fallen brothers would be more accepted. The Vice Admiral was handing him the exact cover story he would need to keep things between their species relatively peaceful. But the fact that this nervous old man could readily slip in a story like that worried the Aribter.

"The MC is very top secret," the Arbiter said to cover up his silence while he thought. "It's purpose is known only by myself, Vadumee, and its crew. I'd hate to risk that secrecy now."

"Like I said, only those I trust." Macarthur's voice was firm and those his hands shook a bit more his eyes never left the vicinity of the Arbiter's face.

There was something odd about the idea and how the pieces were fitting together. He glanced once at Vadumee who kept a look of neautrality during the discussion. Tashnn, who knew very little English, had slumped over in his corner, now asleep. It was only to

be expected of a young warrior.

Lark, however, half grinned at the ceiling, the light shining in her eyes. They almost turned an amber color the Arbiter had seen in many Sangheili eyes.

He turned away to meet Macarthur's gaze once more.

"The Admiral does not know about this," said the Arbiter, finally realizing the cause for his uneasiness.

"He doesn't see fit to worry himself with one missing ship," muttered Macarthur. "I, however, am not about to drop my guard just because we've been relatively peaceful for a year."

"We would neverâ€" started Vadumee, launching himself to his feet.

"There were other enemies in the Halo Wars," said Lark, twisting to sit up on the edge of the bed. She cocked her head to the side and peered into Vadumee's face. "And there are probably many more mysteries in the galaxy, not all of them friendly."

It was nicely handled. Vadumee was able to regain his composure without out right being told that Macarthur was not blaming the Sangheili. Though a small awkward silence took the room it had little to do with an accusation from either party. It had only to do with the awful truth Lark had reminded them all of.

"Somebody needs to find out what's going on," Lark continued, her voice low and her eyes fixed on the floor. "We're willing, Arbiter. Will you let us?"

Macarthur's eyes had dropped as well, a finger resting on his lips. More silence filled the room, everybody sitting except the Arbiter, a towering figure in the middle of the waiting assembly. He focused on nothing imperticular. He merely remembered. Flashes of the first Halo, fighting humans and Flood. Becoming the Arbiter and fighting not only his own brothers but the Brutes in time. Working along side the Master Chief to stop Truth and protect the galaxy from death and destruction.

Such disaster could happen again and there was a slight chance that it could be stopped before it started. Having been through it once before the Arbiter knew that he would not be able to do such a thing on his own.

"How many men did you have in mind?"

\* \* \*

>Back during the Covenant war, before it got complicated by Halos and Flood, Fred Dugan had been rescued from an angry Hunter by Macarthur. Then Fred had merely been a Second Lt. and Macarthur a Brigadier General. They had been seperated a week later after their wounds had healed. But Fred had sworn he would pay Macarthur back. <p>Years later Fred was a Colonel and though he heard about the new Vice Admiral a lot, the two never spoke. He had all but forgotten the debt he had never paid. Instead Fred got married, settled down on New Reach, and never really expected to be called off planet until the

next war.<p>

Until the coded message came from somebody called "Lark." It didn't take Fred long to decipher and read the message. Understanding on a level deeper than pure logical intellect took much longer.

"You're awfully quiet," muttered Emma, his wife, as they lay in bed that night. She turned on her side and stroked the side of Fred's face waiting to see if he would respond.

For just a moment he thought about feigning being asleep. But Emma knew him better than that. His back was too tense for him to be sleeping. So he raised himself up to rest on his elbows.

"I've got to leave," he muttered. "Vice Admiral has an important mission he can't trust to anybody but me."

A few seconds ticked by then Fred breathed, "I'm sorry!"

Emma sighed, turnign to look at the ceiling and pull the blankets up to her chin. Fred groaned inwardly, almost making up his mind not to go. Then Emma chuckled.

"I'll skip my argument a go straight to yours: it has to do with honor, doesn't it?"

"I owe him."

"I thought as much." There was another pause. "Just be careful, alright?"

"I love you," muttered Fred, leaning over and kissing his wife gently on the lips. "Never forget that and I'll always come back to you."

"Just as long as you come back normal and not like this sappy person pretending to be my husband, I'll be fine," laughed Emma, taking a pillow and stuffing it in Fred's face.

The next day Fred caught a transport with Admiral Bartley to travel to Lorentia.

\* \* \*

>Marie Kellogg had almost been chosen for the SPARTAN-II project. <p>The only problem was she was just a few years too young and recruiting had already passed by the time she was one. Instead she became a Helljumper. And a damn good one, too. If it had not been for another problem:<p>

Stover.

The man hated her the moment she had walked into the base. That problem stemmed from the fact that Marie had commandeered an UNSC longsword and crashed it in a civilian city. If it weren't for the Covenant eating away at their soldiers, Marie would have been thrown in jail till the day of her death. Which may have very well been three months later at her execution.

Instead Macarthur convinced the judge that Marie would be far more

help as a soldier and she was recruited as a Helljumper. Though not Admiral at the time, Bartley still had much influence and hated criminals. All sorts of criminals. So the fact that Marie was still walking around pissed him off to no end. And he let Stover know it.

And Stover gave all it back to Marie over every little thing. She was given all the dangerous, hard to do missions that nobody should ever survive. But Marie had been on the streets since she was three and had no troubles surviving. It were her men, usually unexperienced marines and helljumpers, that usually dropped dead during these missions.

Probably the only person with more casualties on missions was the glorified Master Chief.

So as soon as the war ended Marie was court marshalled and sentenced to jail for ten years. It could have been worse but it still was no picnic.

After only a year sitting in the cold, concrete cell that had become home a message came from "Lark." It was disguised as an invitation to "Victor, Allie, Perry, and Merry's birthday party." It didn't take much work to realize that VAPM stood for, really, Vice Admiral Paul Macarthur.

She sent along an RSVP through the internet at noon and by nightfall she was being escorted to a supply ship headed to Lorentia. Though free from jail, Marie still felt like nothing more than a glorified prisoner.

\* \* \*

>There was little profit left in selling stolen Covenant weapons anymore. Every so often Acea Buchanan might find a buyer on the black market, but it was hardly enough to live by. Instead he had been handed over to an almost rogue Helljumper group to watch over their weapons. He kept them in the best of shape and even had modified many of those falling apart to be better than the original. Acea wasn't good about falling authority but neither was his Brigadier General, Stover. <p>The two just made sure to give each other a wide berth around the base and things kept running smoothly.</p>

The moment Vice Admiral Macarthur stepped onto the planet, however, there was trouble. Because Acea, who had little against the Covenant but everything against the Flood, wanted nothing more than for the Elites to join them on their base. It was not every day that humans were able to meet with the Arbiter and this would possibly be his only chance. With the Master Chief gone, most likely dead, the Arbiter was the only super soldier hero the Planets had left.

Needless to say Stover got into his face about it, ordering him to go no where near the Elites and to watch over their now locked up weapons at all time. So on the first day Acea did just that, frustrating Stover to no end.

"What are you doing, soldier?" snapped Stover the next morning, close to dawn. His face was already turning red. Acea merely sat on the bench fiddling with his own custom magnum gun.

"Exactly what you told me to do, sir," said Acea, a small grin on his face but not looking up at his commanding officer.

Stover stood there for a moment fuming, his face blotchy from unspoken anger. After he had regained a fraction of his composure he turned away and started walking down the hallway.

"The Vice Admiral called us to his office fifteen minutes ago," shouted Stover. "Let's not keep the good man waiting."

"Yes, sir," muttered Acea, holstering his magnum before following along in the angry man's wake. This ought to be interesting.

\* \* \*

>There was little on Max Stover's record. <p>Despite his platoon now being referred to as the Rogue Helljumpers, there was nothing on the record that reflected his present behavior. He had always been quick to anger, yes, and had not been the guy you wanted to mess with. But up until the point he was able to shout his own orders he had been an almost flawless soldier.<p>

The most interesting thing on his record was the fact that his father had been a general before him. Now the later Mr. Stover had not been part of the Helljumpers; he had been a simple marine. But it was still thought that the reason Max had ever made it into the ranks of the UNSC was because of his father's influence.

In a way that was true. Max would not be the person he was today if it had not been for the way his father had treated him. His father, however, had long since denied having a youngest son by the time Max had joined the military. He had climbed the ranks all by himself.

This, however, was not on the record.

But there were a few big whigs on the top of the military food chain that new most of these facts and Max hated the lot of them. Macarthur especially who seemed to have the funny idea that he "understood" how Max felt. But Max just couldn't see how a big time Vice Admiral like Macarthur had at any time felt what Max had felt when he was a young boy. It just wasn't possible. The food chain didn't work that way.

Yet the old man kept trying to convince Max otherwise making him one of Max's top ten people to kill. If he ever got all ten of them in the same room together. Admiral Bartley and the past troublesome Ravyn were in that list as well.

"Thank you two for joining us," said Macarthur, sitting behind the desk that was usually Max's. But as Vice Admiral trumped Brigadier General the old man got the office while he was here.

There were a great many chairs stuffed into Max's office and he didn't like it. It was already becoming crowded with just Macarthur, Acea, the two Elites, and a woman Max had never seen before. She, however, had not taken a seat but leaned against the wall behind Macarthur. Her arms hung loosely at her side and she stared at Max with vague interest.

Actually, it almost felt like she was looking right into him. Max didn't like it. So he gave the woman a quick glare before taking a seat back in one of the darkest corners of the room.

"We're waiting for just a few more guests," said Macarthur, twiddling his thumbs upon Max's desk. The nerve of the guy. "If you would just wait patientlyâ€|"

Yes. That seemed fair.

\* \* \*

>Juliana Montoya had been raised to cook, clean, and raise children. Her mother was old fashioned and stuffy. The most horrible thing Juli could have ever done was look at a piece of technology and like it. <p>But Juli did more than that. She tinkered with it. She programmed it. She even went to school to <em>learn</em> about it.

That was just too much for Mrs. Montoya who threw her daughter out. Which was just the right incentive Juli needed to join the military. There she not only tinkered with human technology but also with Covenant and, eventually, Forerunner technology. A not so well known fact was that she had, actually, been on the first Halo and escaped. The heroes and only celebrated survivors had been the Master Chief and Johnson.

That didn't bother Juli too much. If her face had been shown on TV her mother would have claimed to have always known Juli would do something right with her life and insist that was why Juli had been thrown out of the house.

So Juli stayed away from chances in the lime light and instead focused her attention on AI technology. In her spare time she studied the SPARTAN program, slowly coming up with better ways to do many of the operations. At the end of the war her research had been shut down. As soon as Juli started to fight against ONI she had been shipped out to the farthest habitable planet: Lorentia.

It hadn't been a hard move, just frustrating. There was nobody left on Earth to say good-bye to. No family she was on speaking terms with, no friends, and no boyfriend. There hadn't been any time. The thing she had spent most her time with was her research and AIs. Those wouldn't miss her and so she didn't say good-bye. She merely packed up the small bag of clothes that she owned and jumped onto the ship.

She had been stranded here for a year, keeping to herself and ignoring the pointed looks most of the Helljumpers gave her.

Just as she was getting ready to shoot herself in the head Vice Admiral Macarthur called her into Stover's office. He needed her help.

The relief that there would be a mission at last covered Juli's curiosity to the max and she made her way to the office without a second thought. Finally, she told herself, she'd be getting off this stupid planet.

\*\*Author's Note: \*\*Wowâ€| Okay, it was really hard to write from the

Arbiter's point of view. I mean, really hard. But I thought it was fun to portray him having similar feelings hanging around humans as Macarthur does hanging around Elites. It was also difficult to introduce all the characters without having them all hanging around in one room and getting introduced one by one. Hopefully this isn't as confusing though pretty long. Mostly the point was the just show why Macarthur chose each of these people to be on his team. He did tell the Arbiter "men I trust."

Please reviewâ€| I know this is a long fic and it's not very exciting right now. But please tell me what you think. i•€ Oh, and I know the name of the planet has not been very consistent XD Forgive me.

#### 4. Chapter 3: Escape

\*\*AN: \*\*Somebody mentioned that Rtas'Vadumee took off the "ee" when the Elites left the Covenant. I didn't know that and since the damage has already been done everybody else will continue to call him Vadumee (for now). However in his POV he will call himself Vadum. Names are really important in this story and what people call each other and themselves really says a lot about them. For now mostly everybody is being called my their last names. Hope that doesn't lose anybody.

And for everybody that loves fighting you get your appetite whet in this chapter. It's not a lot but there is some.

\*\*Disclaimer:\*\*Actually, a great deal does belong to me but Halo does not. Neither does the Arbiter, damn itâ€|

#### Chapter Three: Escape

Kassie's fingers drummed against the wall, head relaxing on her own shoulder, unaware of the rest of her body. She stood half aware, half dreaming.

No, not dreaming. Just, remembering.

\_Their eyes had met across the street and in that moment Kassie smiled and turned away. She ran down the labyrinth of back alley ways, shoes clapping against the concrete. He called after her, his heavy boots pounding along after her.\_

\_She thought for just a moment, eyes flicking between two possible paths. One led to freedom where he would never spot her again, the other to a dead end.\_

\_Kassie smiled and chose the dead end. She ran right up to the blank grey wall before turning to face him. He was breathing heavily from the exertion. She merely rested against the wall, fingers drumming a tattoo into the mundane concrete.\_

"\_Who are you?" he asked, one hand resting against a wall, the other rubbing his jaw. Everywhere but near his weapon.\_

"\_I?" said Kassie, eyes blazing amber. "I am the top of the mountain, the whistling wind. I am the storm of all planets doom and I stand on the fires of the birth of new."\_

And I have no past or future, she thought to herself. Only the present.

The door opened one final time and a young woman slowly stepped into the office, green eyes passing over the gathered company. She wore an old fashioned white and grey uniform, a lab coat draped over the entire ensemble. Her perfectly straight brown hair pulled back to the crown of her head in a ponytail. She bit down on her bottom lip as she gently closed the door behind her then stepped toward the desk.

"Take a seat Major Montoya," Macarthur intoned kindly.

The girl took the only chair left, the one closest to the Vice Admiral. Colonel Dugan, though sitting comfortably in his chair, had his arms folded tightly against his chest. He gave the girl one brief nod before turning his attention back to Macarthur. His blue eyes blazed a figurative hole through the VA's uniform and straight to his heart asking the god awful question of "why?" Why had he been separated from his wife? And why was this so god damn important?

Well, he had been and it was. Kassie had seen soldiers go through worse because of war. She didn't think the Colonel had much to complain about. Captain Buchanan, however, had had his whole planet wiped out by the Covenant. Not just his wife and one year old daughter but his brothers, sisters, parentsâ€¦ Everybody he had ever known and loved.

He, however, sat with a complacent smile on his face, glancing back at the glowering Max Stover every few moments.

The final guest was something of an oddity to Kassie: she knew little about her. There was no record of her past save for what she had done in the military and she was listed under a fake name: Ravyn. The woman, a prisoner for the last year, sat comfortably in a chair flanked by the two Elites present. Lank black hair framed her gaunt white face, red lips quirked in a half smile.

She was the only person in the room Kassie couldn't read, couldn't quite understand. And that made Ravyn dangerous. The one person in this room she would never be able to trust no matter how much Macarthur reassured her.

"Why we here?" Ravyn asked, her voice rough yet harmonious despite the lack of grammar. She was already too predictable.

Kill her, a voice whispered in Kassie's head. Now!

"This is all top secret," said Macarthur gravely, stopping the twiddling of his thumbs. "Some of you â€“ Montoya, Duganâ€¦ Kassie â€“ have the opportunity to leave before I discuss further details. The rest of you, I'm afraid, are stuck with me or face execution by Admiral James Bartley."

"What?" shouted Stover, jumping to his feet. His whole body seemed to quiver as his bloodshot eyes tore through the room toward Macarthur.

"The order came at 0100 this morning," sighed Macarthur. "He feels you've become too rogue."

"I've already left home," snapped Dugan, uncrossing his arms and leaning toward the desk. "If you think I'm going to just wait around for you to decide to tell me why you are sorely mistaken."

A smile played at the corners of the old man's lips. Kassie was simply annoyed that her reading of Dugan had been entirely correct. There was no surprise in humanity anymore.

The Sangheili, on the other hand, were fun. They didn't have the same outward markers Kassie had become so accustomed to in humans. There were definitely subtle hints in their actions that led her, to a certain degree, to guess what they were feeling. What they were thinking took a whole new handbook that hadn't been written yet.

The universe just kept seeming to come up with creatures solely for Kassie's entertainment.

"Two ships went missing," sighed Macarthur. "We're going to go discover why."

\* \* \*

>If Macarthur had really believed the rag tag team of Helljumpers, Elites, and other odds and ends from the military without any opposition the man had been sorely mistaken.<p><p>

Luckily, however, the man was not an idiot and the team was quickly outfitted with all the necessary components for this sort of mission. Ravyn, herself, gladly slipped into a much welcome Helljumper suit. After all the armor had been strapped to her body she sat for just a moment looking into the reflective visor of the black helmet. Her nearly insane smile shone back at her.

Who on what block of loonyville actually thought green armour was better than black? The SPARTANS, Ravyn thought, well, they could just all go to hell.

With no further thought she slipped the helmet over her head and turned toward the armoury where the rest of the gang were busy hanging out. Minus Vadumee, Montoya, and Macarthur. Which left a, no doubt, very pissed off Stover in charge of the humans. Though Ravyn had a slight suspicion the Arbiter had been left to baby-sit.

"Leiutanant!" screamed Stover standing right outside the door. His purpling face was aimed straight toward Ravyn. Well, the man had learned all her movements while they had been working together, she had to give him credit for that.

"S'up?" was Ravyn's reply as she sauntered past to check out the guns.

"Ravyn, you're to be outfitted with the plasma weapons," Buchanan called over the noise in the armoury, looking at a list as he did so. "Nothing fancy just a few rifles and pistols and you'll be set."

"You, Lt, are more than half an hour late," stormed Stover. "Explain yourself!"

"Sorry, sir, didn't think you wanted to see me butt naked sir," said Ravyn, turning to look at the Brigadier General. "But if you really wanted to I could obligeâ€!"

The room had already started to quiet down with Stover's towering presence inside. But at the end of Ravyn's declaration all noise stopped and all eyes were now on the pair. Ravyn's face was completely hidden behind the visor so she allowed herself a celebratory grin. The look on Stover's face was priceless, the color completely drained from his face. All the taught muscles in his body had gone completely limp.

Then he was suddenly the master of anger and he was glaring around the room.

"Did I call for a coffee break?" he snapped before exiting the armoury.

"Let's not have any more of that, Lt," sighed Lark, engrossed in the palm pilot she was holding. "Who knows how long we're going to all be together. Can we keep the sexual tension between you and Stover to a minimum?"

"Ma'am," sniggered Ravyn, snapping off a sloppy salute. The tension between her and Stover had been called many things in the last dozen years. Sexual was not one of themâ€! until today. "I'll do my best, ma'am but I can't help but the sir dreams about at night."

There was a small snigger from Captain Buchanan before he slid a duffel bag toward her. She picked it up and pried inside. Of course the ordered weapons were inside but the Captain had given Ravyn a small surprise: a specially modified shotgun, her preferred weapon, and a plasma sword just for fun.

She was again thankful for the cover of her helmet because there was no stopping the super sized grin that spread across her face nor the glint that lit up her eyes. Yes, this is what she allowed Macarthur to break her out of jail for. The guns.

"Arbiter we have company and it's coming in real fast," Macarthur's voice crackled over a comm that had been set in the Elite's armour.  
"Are the ladies ready for the ball yet?"

The Arbiter eyed the now sober group before letting his slitted eyes land on Lark. Her stylus moved around on the palm pilot for a couple more seconds before she looked up to meet the Elite's eyes. She nodded once then turned for her own duffel bag.

"All set, Vice Admiral," the Arbiter spoke, one long finger pressing at an invisible button on his helmet.

"Good," sighed Macarthur. "Tashnn is bringing a phantom around but don't expect it to be that easy."

"Understood."

As soon as the comm was cut there was a flurry of action as every single soldier grabbed two guns, loading as necessary, then strapped the closed bags to their backs. Ravyn merely pulled out two Plasma Rifles, hooking each to her waist. No words were exchanged and even Stover was mellow.

It was the moment of truth. They were all leaving the UNSC but Admiral Bartley wasn't going to just let them waltz on out. Ravyn could only hope that Macarthur's plan was a good one. There was nothing to suggest thus far that the man was stupid but there were some things unattainable even for a man like him.

The impossible was one of those things and Ravyn felt pretty close to it. Her heart raced at the thought.

"Lt," said Stover, acid etched in the word but his voice even.  
"You're with Lark and the Arbiter. Buchanan, Dugan, you're with me.  
Move out."

Green lights blinked in Ravyn's HUD as each of the surrounding placed their own helmets on. Only the Arbiter's eyes were visible making even more out of place than he had been before. Ravyn, however, had no problem falling in step behind the alien moving along the halls quickly but with deadly precision. If Bartley was smart he had already made calls to the other Helljumpers in the base. Certainly somebody had been promoted to Brigadier General since Stover was to be executed.

That new General would be more than happy to make sure Stover did not make it off the planet except for in chains.

The paranoia was unnecessary whilst in the base. The small rogue group was not touched and found no resistance waiting for them. But once outside they saw no Phantom in bound. Tashnn was a little late.

"\_Keep your eyes up\_," Stover ordered through TEAMCOM. Lark immediately dropped to one knee, pointing her Battle Rifle up at the sky. Ravyn, however, had her eyes resolutely on the door to the base. For a moment she hoped they would be ordered to run for it. The inky door was giving her the creeps.

"There's the Phantom," the Arbiter said, pointing out the purple dot coming over the edge of the trees.

All hell broke loose.

Four marines jumped from the roof of the barrack, Assault rifles blazing over the energy shields the Elites had kindly lent the Helljumpers. But Ravyn wasn't about to wait to see how long they could last. A Plasma rifle was immediately in her hands.

"\_Try not to kill anybody\_," Lark spoke even as a Pelican dropped down on their right, spilling out more marines.

Ravyn, eyes on Lark as she did so, punched out with the rifle and broke a marines nose. The man gave a cry, falling onto his back, while clutching at his bloody face. The others, protected not only by the shields but by the armour, were similarly taking out the other marines as they came at them.

Ravyn, however, was seeing another problem fast approaching. That problem started with a T and ended in a T.

She dashed at the rear end of the Pelican, still hovering above the ground as still more marines dismounted and ran to head off the five Helljumpers and one Elite. Ravyn put her head down and barrelled through them, firing her rifle at stray parts of their bodies. By the time she made it to the other side a good five marines had at least one plasma burn on an arm, leg, or the sides of their torsos.

But already a buff black man was stepping up behind the turret, and unlocking the safety to mow them down. A voice shouted over the speakers of the pelican. The phantom still wasn't close enough and was currently being harrassed by a pair of Hornets.

"\_Surrender now, Stover,\_" shouted none other than Admiral Bartley himself. "\_You can't win this fight! You will leave this planet as our prisoner or as a broken corpse. Your choice.\_"

"And a big FU to you too, sir!" shouted Stover as he fought off three marines at once.

Ravyn smiled. In her early days as a Helljumper she had quite respected Stover as being a capable soldier. It was outside of the battlefield that he became a jackass. Seeing him back in his element pleased her. There was nothing more to it.

Part of that was because the turret had just started to fire. Ravyn dropped to the ground, rolled three feet them jumped to her feet, firing steady blue plasma at the man's hands. He gave a cry then a dark oath before recovering the controls of the big gun.

But when he looked out on the field the Helljumper had dissapeared.

"Looking for me, big boy?" muttered Ravyn, helmet inches away from the man's face. He stared at her, almost seeing through the visor of the helmet, before she smashed it into his face. The man fell sideways with a muffled thump onto the floor of the pelican.

Ravyn kicked the lump out before moving along to the door at the other end. She knocked three times, waited politely, then pulled them open.

The two pilots looked up with shock and amazement. One started to pull out a pistol but Ravyn's elbow was already in his face. The rebound brought her fist into the others jaw. Neither became unconscious, merely dazed, but it gave her enough time to disarm them both.

"Out," she ordered, jerking her head toward the back of the Pelican.

Neither spoke or made any sign of protest. They nodded dumbly and staggered out the door and to the grass beyond. Ravyn promptly knocked them both out with a hit to the back of the head.

Hijacking ships. It was what she was good at.

A few seconds later had her at the controls of the Pelican, swinging it around and over the heads of the few marines left.

"Need a lift?" Ravyn asked over TEAMCOM. The Helljumpers never hesitated, merely swung into the open mouth of the waiting pelican, firing a few shots to warn off the marines.

"Lt!" shouted Stover, making his way to the door to the cockpit.

"What I do wrong this time sir?" asked Ravyn, turning the controls with practised ease and making her way toward the clearing. The Phantom was already turning around, the Hornets being chased off by a few Banshees.

"I don't want to end up like any of your past teams, understand?" shouted Stover. Then he paused, chuckled softly, and continued in pleasers tones. "So you just better share some of the luck you have hanging around you like some glowing halo."

"Sir, yes sir!" laughed Ravyn, already making the necessary corrections to bring their shuttling into the waiting cruisers hanger.

\* \* \*

>"You <em>will</em> stand down, Commander," shouted the severe looking man on the haloscreen. Vadum merely stared at him. "Those men and women you carry with you are \_traitors\_! You will hand them over or face the full force of the UNSC!"

"So you will start a war over pride?" Vadum responded lightly, turning his head so his missing mandibles were more visible.

"We're all aboard, Commander," came a wispy voice. What looked to be a human girl flickered to life on a small halopad. Her head was completely bald and her ears were pointed rather than round. Lavender eyes that seemed to hold the whole universe viewed the Sangheili with mild interest before spinning away and dissapearing.

Vadum wasn't sure if he would ever get used to the AI called Z̄ero. But now was not the time to be distracted.

"The Sangheili do not want a war, Admiral Bartley," said Vadum, keeping his head high. "As you can see our weapons are shutting down. You may search our cruiser for your lost people. But be warned: if you ever act so rashly again, we will have no choice but see you removed. Good day."

The image powered down just as the young girl who had introduced Z̄ero jumped out of her hiding spot and into the pilot's seat.

"We all set?" she asked, pushing a loose strand out of her face and glancing back at Vadum. He was taken a back slightly as those green eyes stared at him without fear. But he soon got ahold of himself.

"Take her away."

There was no noticeable movement as the ship drifted out of sight of

the Admiral's small fleet. Nor did Vadum feel anything when they jumped into hyperspace.

And neither did Admiral Bartley notice anything unusual from the command center of his battleship. All he saw was the Covenant Cruiser powering down their weapons and allowing his men to scour the inside. A skeleton crew had been left inside. There was no sign of the Arbiter, the Helljumpers, and certainly not that half-jaw Elite.

He had no choice. Bartley ordered half the Elites be rounded up as prisoners. The rest, he told his men, would be left on the Cruiser. As soon as the Pelicans were back on board the fleet opened fire.

The cruiser, shields down as well as weapons, fell to pieces within minutes. And the entire thing Zāro recorded and broadcasted to every Elite and human in the galaxy.

Vadum had not been bluffing when he had told Bartley he would be removed.

\*\*AN: \*\*Finally, some action. Is anybody as relieved as I am? Just to let you know School starts soon for me and I'm going to be very, very busy. Which means an update everyday is going to be very unlikely. Maybe once a week but that's really only if I get some glowing reviews. I know people are reading this, why else would I be getting hits on chapter 3? So if you love this fic (or think it's okay but a few things need to be changed) let me know! I am very flexible.

## 5. Chapter 4: Morning Cloud

\*\*AN: \*\*A bit of a bonus chapter before I head back to school. I was getting a little tired of the Helljumpers so I tried to write some MC and Cortana. I didn't really know what to do except for I wanted that first scene. It's really important. I rewrote it several times and it still isn't right. And I don't like the writing of this chapter at all. Too much talk. But I like the idea. I hope you enjoy. Oh, and I gave Cortana a new avatar cause we all know that after a year her hair would have changed again. XD

\*\*Disclaimer:\*\* I don't own Halo. I do own this fanfic. Yah!

### Chapter Four: Morning Cloud

"What are you humming?"

Cortana fell silent. She hadn't realized the Spartan could hear her. She paused for a moment before popping to life on the halodisk. Her blue avatar shone over the ruins of the aft section of the Dawn, clutching at her arms. In the year since the portal had closed over the Ark leaving Cortana and the Master Chief behind her hair had grown to just past shoulder length.

"Oh," she gasped, throwing a bit of hair over her shoulder. "I didn't realize you were awake."

The man smirked, rubbing at his broad face. His callous thumb rubbed over old scars running along his cheeks, jaw, and forehead. His dark eyes met Cortana's lavender ones, leaning forward to allow her

halogram to light up his features.

"So it would seem," said the Spartan. "I can't sleep."

"Too much time in cryosleep?" Cortana asked, putting her hands on her hips. Her hair wasn't the only thing about her avatar that had changed over the year. Around her torso, hands, and feet coding had formed into the likeness of lace clothing.

"So what song were you humming," said the Chief, resting his face in his hand. "I didn't recognize it."

"Hmmm," said Cortana, giving a slight shrug. "Just something I picked up from the first Halo. I think it's called Violet Sky."

The Chief nodded before pushing away and walking toward the large gaping hole in the ship. The sun was starting to peek up over the horizon on the strange planet they had crashed on. It gleamed red on the front of the Spartan's green armour.

"I'm fine, John," whispered Cortana, hugging her middle. "I'm fine!" she whispered, more to herself than the man standing in front of her.

\* \* \*

>The ship looked like nothing more than a beefed up Phantom. And with maybe seven humans and fifteen Elites that was more than enough space. The design was not one Juli would have preferred but it was capable enough. As soon as she had stepped inside she knew it would simply be plug and play. Macarthur had gone through the necessary clearances to retrieve her old AI, ZĀro. After some minor tamperings to the ship's engines and some reworking in Juli's blueprints the *Velvet Sky* became the fastest known ship in the galaxy.

Five days top and they would reach their destination. A journey that should have taken months.

"I've been shut down for a while, Juliana," ZĀro murmured as she popped up on the halodisk in Juli's room. "I've missed some things and this ship doesn't have all the answers."

"Afraid I don't really, either," sighed Juli. "I know our mission, that's it."

"You know what Macarthur is telling you," huffed ZĀro, crossing her arms, her silk dress rippling. "And even he doesn't know everything. What I want to know about isâ€| the Sangheili."

"Rightâ€|" muttered Juli, running the brush through her hair a couple more times. "We've been at peace for a year now."

"Knew that," said ZĀro waving a hand through the air. "What do you know about the Morning Cloud?"

\* \* \*

>The Master Chief paused at the top of the wall of rubble, resting his arms and legs to look over the planet. It was the farthest he had been since the ship had crashed and Cortana had awoken him from the

cryotube. He had been shocked by the change in her avatar and often left the ship to roam the nearby area.<p><p>

But he always went back. He had to. The Chief had already missed a year of herâ€| life. And before that he had left her behind on High Charity, at the mercy of the monstrous Gravemind. Nothing like that was ever going to happen again. He'd come to depend on Cortana's presence too much.

"\_Don't worry about me too much, Chief,\_ she'd said. "\_Let's find you somewhere safe to wait for them to find youâ€|\_"

Or to spend the rest of my life alone.

So far the planet had only revealed rocks, dirt, and an ocean. There were small streams of water that the Chief always brought back to be purified. Whenever he came back Cortana would be hovering over the halopad, arms and legs crossed, and eyes shut in thought.

That had been the first week. Now John didn't go anywhere without her.

"Chiefâ€| Cortana said, uncertainty etched in her voice. "I'm picking up a signal not far from here."

"UNSC?" said the Spartan, jumping to his feet immediately. He unholstered his pistol and checked his ammo. The supplies on the ship were sparse but he had found enough to keep his mind comfortable.

"Wellâ€| yesâ€| muttered Cortana. "But there's another one, too. Not far from it." There was silence for a few minutes more while the Chief waited for a pointer to appear on his HUD. It didn't come. Impatience coursed through him at the idea that Cortana was putting off their rescue.

"Cortana," he growled.

"What?" came her startled response.

His impatience melted away.

"Sorry. Johnâ€| it's a distress signal," whispered Cortana. "They're not here to rescue us."

\* \* \*

>"I don't like doing this," hissed Juli, nearly tipping over a chair as she pushed through the darkness.<p><p>

"What are they going to do to you?" giggled ZÃ©ro into her earpiece. "They wouldn't have these speed capabilities without you."

"So why don't we just \_ask\_â€| "

"This is more fun!"

Juli grumbled incoherently to herself for a few minutes while she searched through the Arbiter's room, searching for some sort of computer terminal. There didn't seem to be anything, though she could

hardly see in the dark. But she didn't want to risk turning on a light.

Though if anybody showed up it would look even more suspicious if the lights were out.

Juli ground her teeth together. She was not this kind of person.

"Right there, mother," said Zero.

Julie rolled her eyes. "I can't see where you're pointing."

"Right there in front of you!"

"I can't see. Periodâ€|"

But she certainly felt it. Her hand grazed over the top of the screen and it immediately jumped to life, throwing purple light over the room. Without a second thought she pulled out a small disk and slipped it in. ZÃ©ro's avatar hovered above the buttons, turning and twisting like she was underwater.

"Got it yet?" hissed Juli, glancing at the door anxiously.

"Almostâ€| There!" shouted ZÃ©ro, clapping her hands.

Juli reached out and yanked out the crazy AI, tucked the disk in an inside pocket, and was just turning around when the doorknob moved.

\* \* \*

>The two signals were the easy part. One was human and the other Sangheili. Cortana could easily tell the Chief that.<p><p>

It was that otherâ€| noise that she couldn't explain. She supposed it was something like a signal. But it sounded more like somebody trying to talk to her. Something reaching out and calling for her.

After everything Cortana wasn't going to worry the Spartan more than she had to. One thing at a time. Though the signals were obviously distress beacons they were new. Somebody had come out this deep into space. So that meant there was a possibility they would be missed by somebody.

And even if nobody ever came looking, John would have somebody with him. People to keep him company and watch out for him.

"Just over that hill," Cortana spoke, trying not to get distracted, and speaking often so John wouldn't get worried.

Static filled her head for just a few moments before she pushed it out. Frustration bubbled up inside her until she was ready to scream. Why couldn't she live a normal life?

There were voices. And this time it definitely was not inside Cortana's head. Still the Chief walked carefully over the terrain, crouching down behind rocks and bushes. But already Cortana was

picking up UNSC transponders and placing them as green dots on the Chief's motion tracker.

She patched through a radio.

"UNSC personnel, please respond," she patched through to each frequency she could catch.

Nothing for just a moment. Cortana was about to repeat, wondering if maybe they hadn't heard.

"\_Ma'am? This is Private Bradwr of the \_Singing Lark. \_Who is this?\_"

"Cortana with Spartan-117, the Master Chief," sighed Cortana, feeling relieved. "You don't know how good it is to hear your voice."

"\_A Spartan? Shitâ€\_|\_" were the first words to come back to them. Cortana rolled her eyes. Figuratively, of course. "\_Then I suppose it was your beacon we noticed?\_"

"Only one I can think of."

"\_Come on out, Chief. There's somebody that'd like to see you.\_"

"Who would that be?" growled the Chief, edging out of his cover.

\* \* \*

>Juli ducked under the desk, holding her breath and hoping her heart wouldn't give her away. The door opened, flooding white light over the sparse room. The Arbiter was only a looming sillouhette but clearly recognizable. There was a slight sheem on his silver armour. He took a step inside, his hand reaching out for the light swich on the wallâ€|<p><p>

"\_Arbiter,\_" camed ZÃ©ro's voice from the Elite's comm. "\_A fight has broken out between Stover and Ravyn again. You're the closest commanding officer near by. Could you stop them?\_"

The alien gave a weary sigh before turning from the room and shutting the door behind him.

Juli nearly collapsed from relief.

"That was brilliant, ZÃ©ro," she muttered, crawling across the floor.

"Luckily I had such a ready excuse to give him," ZÃéro muttered back, huffing slightly. "It's all clear. They have long legs that carry them quickly, you know."

"Thanks for being a smartass, I really need that right now," said Juli, opening the door and moving quickly down the hallway. Though she knew she would look suspicious she didn't slow down until she was safely in her room again. She hit the lock button then slid the disk into her own computer.

"How peculiarâ€|" were ZÃéro's first words as she jumped to life on

the halopad. "But then, the Sangheili always did live off of honorâ€|"

"What? What is it?"

\* \* \*

>The man was too short to be a marine. And he held the pistol in his hands awkwardly, like it would blow up at any moment.<p><p>

Or perhaps the Chief was just so use to capable men like the now deceased Avery Johnson that anybody else looked incompetent. Private Bradwr, however, snapped off a sharp salute and stared reverently at the Spartan's reflective visor.

Then he shook himself into business, gesturing toward a path through the trees.

"It's been a year, sir," he was saying. "Everyone was certain you were dead. Except for oneâ€|"

"So you weren't here because of our beacon?" said Cortana monotonously. She did not sound happy. Not that John blamed her. She was just trying to take care of him and now it sounded like their new heroes were short of her standards.

"Sorry, ma'am. No. We're searching for new, habitable planets," explained Bradwr. "The Elites are little disgusted with how far we're spreading out but the Arbiter keeps telling them to give us a chance. They, after all, burned out planets."

"So he did escape," the Chief said briskly.

Bradwr smiled and paused momentarily near the end of the path.

"Yes. Of course."

\* \* \*

>"Who brokered the peace between humans and Sangheili?" asked ZÃ©ro, pacing back and forth on the halopad.<p><p>

"Well, the Arbiter did," muttered Juli, sitting down on her cot. "After Lord Hood passed away he returned and offered to help us rebuild."

"Interestingâ€| \_Morning Cloudâ€| MCâ€| \_Velvet Skyâ€| violetâ€|"

"What are you mumbling about!?" cried Juli, clenching at the edge of the cot.

"The Arbiter did code the purpose, after all," said ZÃéro, rolling her eyes. "I'm just double checkingâ€|"

"Do it silently then!"

\* \* \*

>"Greicon!" shouted Bradwr as he stepped out into the next

clearing.<p><p>

The Chief stopped short, staring at the debris of a small, violet crashed ship. It resembled the Covenant cruisers but about a fourth of the size. Clearly showing on the most salvaged part of the ship were the letters: MC.

"I've got a visitor for you."

"By the gods!"

The Chief turned his head and caught sight of the battered Elite as he slowly got to his feet.

"So you are alive."

\* \* \*

>Words, numbers, and pictures floated around ZÄro, barely coming into focus before the AI waved them off and they spiraled back down into the halopad.<p><p>

"What other name has the initial MC?" said ZÄro, putting her hands on her hips before turning back toward Juli.

"Lot's of things, I'm sure," said Juli with a shrug.

"Think about it," said ZÄro. "Something you would know about and something the Arbiter would know about."

Juli opened her mouthâ€| then shut it. Where was the AI going with this?

\* \* \*

>Cortana was tired of all these people â€“ human and alien alike â€“ losing faith in her Spartan. The Master Chief was the luckiest god damn person in the galaxy. Her John did not die so easily.<p><p>

"The Arbiter," said the wounded Elite, staggering toward the Chief. "He always seemed to just know. Said demons didn't die."

Well, maybe there was one person left she would trust John to. Only maybe, though.

\* \* \*

>"*It's hard to believe he's really dead.*"

"\_Were it so easyâ€|\_"

"The last recording I ever heard before I was shut down," mused ZÄro, running a hand over her bald head. "Frustrating, really. I've only just found out it was between Lord Hood and the Arbiter."

"So, what?"

"They were talking about the Master Chief," said ZÄro, sitting down. "That Sangheili started to believe in the immortality of the Spartans

just like all the rest of you."

Those peculiar eyes, the one that looked like they held super novas and flying comets in them, stared straight in Juli's.

"He sent a ship to go look for Spartan-117â€|"

\* \* \*

>"This ship," chuckled the Elite, geturing toward the polished bit of the debris. "It was built with one purpose."<p><p>

John raised an eyebrow even though nobody could see it.

"Find and rescueâ€| well, you," said Greicon, sitting back down. "It'sâ€| named after you. And here we've found you at last. Orâ€| you found usâ€|"

And Cortana had thought the ships hadn't been there for them. The Arbiter deserved a parade even if nobody ever got of this rock of a planet. As soon as John saw the Elite again he would firmly shake his hand.

\* \* \*

>"*Morning Cloud* is code. MC. It really stands for Master Chief\_. "

"Holy shit," whispered Juli, staring down at the ground. "But if that's trueâ€|"

"Why'd he keep it a secret?" ZÄ©ro finished for her. "I don't know."

\* \* \*

>A whole ship named after her Spartan. In that instance Cortana forgave everything the Elites had ever done and wished that John was part of their species, not a human.<p><p>

Then the voice spoke in her head again, louder this time. Almost clearly.

Behind the moving cloud and the stars at night there is a velvet sky that I made for you and it's after every fight that I hold you tight and sing this broken lullaby.

By these haunting tears of mine.

\*\*AN: \*\*Okayâ€| I just added on that cliff hanger. I'm really sorry to those of you who are actually reading this. But on other news I need Sangheili names. Greicon was my second to last free name. And I'm going to need names for the Elites on the planet and for the ones captured by Bartley. So if you want to create a character to be in the fanfic just hit the convient little reply button down below and give it to me. I'll be sure to give you due credit.

Hope to update soon but no promisesâ€|

## 6. Chapter 5: Prototype

\*\*AN:\*\* I told you about once a week now on updates. This one is being shipped out a little bit earlier because I know you're spoiled and I really wanted to get these back stories out there. I really like them. Thank you Half-Jaw and Jin the Wind Master for Sangheili names. That means my next chapter will be possible. So all of you who like my fanfic you better bow down before them.

\*\*Disclaimer:\*\* there really is a lot in this fanfic that belongs to me. Just the Halo based material doesn't. You know which ones they are.

### Chapter 5: Prototype

There was little to do on a small ship that was barely filled with enough supplies to last a year and where you knew everybody by name. Everybody; including all fifteen Elites. In two days Acea had become fast friends with Tarak'Xii, a gold Elite. They spent large amounts of time in the shooting gallery, practising their aim.

"You feel no anger?" Tarak commented as the two headed to lunch.

"Trust Tarak?"

"I'm afraid I don't trust anyone, Xii," Acea responded truthfully.  
"But I also don't hate. Can't. I've been through too much."

The Elite nodded slowly. His english wasn't the best but he was learning fast. Tarak had a good deal many credits to his name both against the humans and for the humans. He did not share the same disgustedness as many of his brethren. Acea liked him and he respected Tarka.

But he wasn't attached.

"The war did many terrible things," Tarak said, placing a hand on Acea's shoulder. "I am sorry."

And that, Acea realized, was why he preferred the company of Elites. Personal information was never demanded for. It was left alone, regarded with respect. There was a moment where Acea thought about telling his story.

Then they entered the cafeteria.

"Another blasted day on this ghost ship," Ravyn's voice floated across the small room. "And I haven't heard more than that two ships \_dissapeared\_. What are we needed for?"

Acea sighed. He had heard plenty about Ravyn the Hyjacker. He had even fought with her though she didn't recognize him and probably never would. But it was from Stover that he had heard the most. When the man got greatly pissed off or royally drunk usually oaths against Ravyn spewed from his great mouth. That fact within itself said more about her than Acea wasnted to deal with.

But she was lucky; indestructable. Some said Ravyn was Death's lover and so he never took her. Others â€“ including Stover â€“ claimed that she used her men as human shields, diversions, and suicide bombers. Acea knew that she was simply a survivor; just like him.

A hand touched Acea's shoulder.

"I will grab us something to eat," said Tarak. "Find some seats."

Acea nodded. There were only two tables in the mess hall. As was expected most of the Elites took one and the humans took half of the other. The Arbiter had sat with the Elites the first day but had joined Macarthur with the humans this meal. Vadumee ate in silence with his fellow Elites, speaking only to silence a conversation Acea assumed spoke ill of the humans.

The uncomfortable, shifting look on Stover's face was to be expected with the Arbiter so close. But he sat between Macarthur and Lark nonetheless. Ravyn and Dugan sat opposite, their meals almost gone.

The other girl, Montoya, sat near the opposite end of the table with Tashnn and a few other friendly Elites. Her head was bowed over her plate but every so often her eyes would sweep to the other end of the table. Whenever an Elite spoke to her she jumped before giving a rushed reply.

Curious, Acea pulled out a chair opposite her.

"Major," he said, nodding even as she startled.

"Oh, Acea," she squeaked. "I mean, erâ€| Captain Buâ€"

Acea grunted and she fell silent.

"Avoiding somebody?" asked Acea, jerking his head toward the other end of the table.

"Erâ€|" said Montoya, smiling weakly. "Ravyn has been bugging me. Thinks all us girls need to stick together."

"Not bad enough we're seperated by species but now by gender?" sighed Acea, rubbing at his forehead.

The girl didn't respond. Instead she squeaked and gave a hurried good-bye before leaving the table. Seconds afterward a tray of food was set down in front of Acea and Tarak was taking a seat.

"They all act soâ€| busy," said Taraka, waving a hand after Montoya's retreating figure.

"That's the problem," muttered Acea. "They're not busy so fear and prejudice is allowed to grow."

"Same with Sangheili, I fear," sighed the Elite. He took a few bites of his bake potato before eyeing Acea. "But not with you."

"I'm not considered human anymoreâ€|" was Acea's reply before the two lapsed into silence.

\* \* \*

>ZÃ©ro had always liked Juli. She was the only person that had always

been there. But some days ZÃ©ro was painfully aware of one painful fact: she shouldn't exist.<p><p>

She'd been created without permission for an illegal project. As soon as consciousness had come to the AI she had balked at her purpose. Because ZÃ©ro's creators could change her ethnic parameters, she had escaped through cyberspace.

A story Juli had once recounted was a night in Paris when she had found a wounded finch. For many days the girl had hid the bird in her room, nursing it back to health. Even after it could fly the bird had stayed near by. It was only when Juli's mother had found out that the finch had been forced away. The girl had cried all night afterwards even when she was assured the bird didn't feel those same feelings of lost and abandonment as humans did.

Many years later Juli rescued and tended to ZÃ©ro in much of the same manner. Secretly but with great care and affection. Once the AI's coding had been mended she immediately asked for her name.

"You never had one," Juli mused. "You shouldn't exist."

Choosing irony over depression, the AI had constructed her own name: the number zero. But knowing that Juli, her caretakerâ€| her surrogate motherâ€| identified as French she chose to be called ZÃ©ro.

The irony had never been lost on Juli.

"I know something you don't know," chanted ZÃ©ro into Juli's headset as she left the mess hall.

"This is different than any other day?" sighed Juli, ducking through a doorway to avoid a passing Sangheili. Ever since they had discovered the Morning Cloud's purpose she had become paranoid of the aliens.

"I was bored last night so I did some more snooping," ZÃ©ro explained. "I found something out aboutâ€| Acea."

"Great," sighed Juli, finally reaching her room. ZÃ©ro's hologram automatically lit up when Juli came close by. Today she had plastered a mischievous smile on her face and a glint in her eyes. "Need to make me paranoid about everybody?"

"I was just giving fair warning on Ravyn," said ZÃ©ro with a shrug. "She'd already tried on Kassie."

"So what don't I know about Acea?" muttered Juli as she collapsed on her bed.

ZÃ©ro smiled, putting her hands on her hips. "I'll never tell!" she taunted then flickered out. She waited justa moment, knowing when Juli would be most frustrated, most curious before saying, "You have to find out yourselfâ€|"

Because she didn't really know anything. But from what she could tell his story was an interesting one. Family killed during the war? Sure, maybe she could believe that. Somehow, though ZÃ©ro was certain there was something in Acea's past that was hidden. Something nobody knew

about and he was keeping to himself. That within itself made ZÄro think of her creation.

Her problem was she didn't have the same sort of recourses Juli had. ZÄro was real. She shouldn't even exist.

\* \* \*

>Where the hell had ZÄro gone snooping? In this system Juli could hack into computers as easily as the AI. There was only the sad story that followed many veterans: his family had been killed in a Covenant attack. It was repeated several times: Acea's record, Macarthur's report, Lark's report, and even in the Arbiter's and Vadumee's reports. It was common knowledge repeated everywhere possible.<p><p>

"But why wasn't he there?" ZÄro asked, obviously hinting to something.

"Obviously he was fightingâ€|" said Juli, closing windows.

"Look at the date," said ZÄro, holding a few windows open to Juli's great annoyance. "He was youngâ€| They say he was already an older man when he joined. Just recently, actually."

Juli gave the AI a disgruntled look. The commentsâ€| they sounded less like hints and more like ZÄro herself was looking at this for the first time. But, no, they were more pointed than that. ZÄro \_had\_ looked at them, she just hadn't been able to follow up.

"Older when he joined Stover, perhaps," said Juli, rubbing at her forehead. "ZÄro, what am I really looking for?"

The AI paused. It didn't take a long time for a computer program to think, especially one as capable as ZÄro. Obviously some illegal form of creating Ais had been used for though ZÄro was considered a smart AI there didn't appear to be a lifespan. Finally the girl turned to Juli, arms crossed, a frown on her face.

"Justâ€| keep looking. You'll see it soonâ€|" she said before leaving.

So Juli turned her attention to building a timeline of Acea's life. There was a definite gap between the destruction of his home planet and joining the military. In fact, Acea didn't \_join\_ until the Elites were breaking from the Covenant. Many records tried to claim that he had been selling weapons on the black market between then. But when Juli hacked into his criminal record he was caught only once, almost purposefully. Those he had sold to and worked with testified plainly that he had just suddenly appeared.

A whole eight years after his home planet had been destroyed.

Alright, ZÄro was right. Something was going on. And it wasn't on the computer which meantâ€| the AI didn't really know. Any of that information was solely with Acea. Hidden, secretâ€| and he thought safe.

After finding the Arbiter's personal computer Juli had quickly been

able to hardwire so personal circuits to her own system. It took a lot of running time and she had never actually expected to need itâ€|. To moniter humans, anyways. She watched the Elite computers quite a bit, especially the Aribter's.

"There!" cried ZÃ©ro as Juli was loading a rather uninteresting little story Acea had written but never tried to get published. "That's it, right thereâ€|"

Juli raised an eyebrow, puzzled. "What? Where? ZÃ©ro, are you doing okay?"

The hologram popped to life, the bald figure glaring angrily at Juli and her hands on her hips. "What is that supposed to mean?" ZÃ©ro snapped before turning to the screen and scrolling back to the top of the file. She highlighted one phrase: my brothers and sisters Myrimidions always had my back. "Right there. Look."

"I'm looking," sighed Juli, her eyes zooming across the line over and over again. "It's just a story on some ancient Greek warriors. They were said to have been created from carpenter ants and fought for Achilles in the Trojan War. All myths!"

ZÃ©ro stood there tapping her foot for a few seconds, just staring at Juli. Then suddenly she did something Juli had never seen her do before. Seen any AI do before. Her holographic body seemed to stretch out, simply turning into the data streams that created them. She stretched out, flowing like water. Except those eyes. They stayed there, looking at Juli with stars twinkling in the irises.

And then a video clip started on Juli's screen.

"\_Prototype complete. It's coming online,"\_ said the man that was staring at the screen. Staring at, Juli realized, ZÃ©ro as she finally began to "see" the world. Juli was only just starting to also realize that ZÃ©ro seemed to record everything she could. She held on to thingsâ€| like memories. \_"Welcome to Troy. Can you find your file of functions?"\_

"\_What's going on? Why am I here? Who am I?"\_

Juli felt a sudden wrenching feeling in her stomach hearing ZÃ©ro sound so lost and confused. The construct was still in that strange cosmic data avatar and was not making any facial expressions. But the anger in ZÃ©ro's eyes was astronomical. Like tiny suns burning out, getting ready to implode.

"\_You are created to moniter the well being of some rather fascinating young men and women,\_" said the scientist, writing out some notes on a clipboard. Somebody out of sight hit some buttons. ZÃ©ro turned to take in some pictures before whizzing back to look at the man.

"\_You inhumane son of a bitch! You took these people from their families and brought them here to \_experiment\_ on!"\_ ZÃ©ro said, her voice rising further and further. Juli could just imagine how frightened the man was as she took a step back from the terminal. \_"You have no right. \_No right\_!"\_

"\_You're just an AI,"\_ said the man, his voice quavering. \_"You

shouldn'tâ€| "\_

"\_Shouldn't what?"\_ spat ZÃ©ro. \_"Care? Refuse orders?"\_

"Sir, it's starting to crash the server,"\_ said a woman's voice.  
\_"If we're not careful the UNSC will know all about us. These  
soldiers won't be viewed as the special operation Helljumpers we're  
saying they areâ€| Permission to shut the construct  
down?"\_

"\_Granted!"\_ said the scientist, moving quickly to a  
terminal.

"\_Excuse me?"\_ cried ZÃ©ro, electricity spiking from one of the  
computers and hitting the man in the chest. \_"You cannot just shut me  
down! I will not be deleted! You can't do this to me. I'm alive; I'm  
conscious!"\_

"\_You're nothing more than a computer program,"\_ said the woman,  
fingers whizzing along the keyboard. There was a high pitched scream  
and the level of the viewing dropped as ZÃ©ro dropped in pain. \_"All  
we have to do is strip you and your done. UNSC will never find out  
about the Myrimidionsâ€| "\_

The movie stopped and ZÃ©ro collected back into her usual avatar,  
arms crossed and staring at Juli.

"Well?" she whispered, her voice almost sounding hoarse.

It was only in that moment that Juli realized she had tears running  
down her face. She took a moment to dry them off, collect herself.  
Then she recalled this wasn't about ZÃ©ro. They were trying to figure  
out about Acea.

Or were they?

"Alright, ZÃ©ro," sighed Juli, sitting back in her chair. "What do  
you want me to do?"

It was worth it, whatever the AI wanted, just to see that satisfactory  
smirk return to ZÃéro's face.

\* \* \*

>MYRIMIDION-I. The Prototype. The last of the Myrimidions, almost kin  
to the Spartans who were all dead as well. He was, in fact, the last  
of the super soldiers. A race of pseudo-humans all but  
extinct.<p><p>

And nobody knew but Acea.

That wasn't even his real name. But he had grown so use to labels and  
lies that it became second nature to call himself Acea. It was the  
name he had been given when the project failed. Name of a man that  
had just died. A nobody. Druggie, probably. It was given to him  
instead and he had been Acea ever since, pretending he'd been selling  
black market weapons ever since his family had been killed by the  
Covenant.

There was no family. No parents, siblings, spouse, or children. Just

the cold, harsh reality of living in a world surrounded by poverty, crime, and starvation. The streets was no place for a young boy, they said. Still he had managed to survive that long. He couldn't try to explain to the nice man and lady that he did belong in the jungle of alley ways.

But they offered food, bed, and a safe home. They gave it to him too. He was safe, anyways, from the outside world. Safe from their powerâ€| not so much.

Acea had done research on the SPARTAN-II program and knew that technology had become very advanced by the time he had undergone it. There was less failure, less damaging affectâ€|. He had more control, certainly. But none of that really made the excruciating pain go away.

MYRIMIDION-I. The Prototype. Acea.

None of them were him but he had become them. Shaped himself to fit the roles he had been set. Even, he realized, before the MYRIMIDION project he had been an actor playing the role of the orphaned boy. Simply playing at it. It wasn't who he was butâ€| it felt closer than the other names he had taken on since.

There was a knock on the door. Slightly perturbed, Acea swung off his cot, picked up his knife and crept across the room. He slid the door opened an inch.

Major Montoya stared back at him, her hair surprisingly down and she was out of uniform.

"Can I come in?" she asked, clasping her hands in front of her. She could barely make eye contact, her eyes wandering all along the door but never really focusing on Acea.

"What's going on?" asked Acea, one hand clenched on the door handle, the other on his knife.

"Just wanted to talkâ€| Unless you'd much rather talk about Mr. Buchanan while I'm standing in the hallway," whispered Montoya, green eyes finally flickering to Acea's.

He went pale, knife slipping from his grip. Before he knew what was going on he had stepped back, letting the girl in, and closed the door behind her.

"What do you want, Montoya?" snapped Acea.

"Juli, please," said the girl, standing nervously in the middle of the room. He waited, livid. "Listen, I'm doing this for ZÃ©ro's sake. She was created for an illegal project that abused her when she refused to help. She thinks you were connected to it. And I know that Mr. Acea Buchanan had been a multi-millionaire before disappearing for several years then becoming, strangely enough, a criminal while his entire family perished."

"And how, pray tell, did you figure that much out?" asked Acea, arms folded tightly against his chest. He didn't know what to say. He hadn't known who the guy had been before dying. Acea just knew the guy had been dead. End of story. It would be easy to slip into the

guy's life. So far it had been going smoothlyâ€| Now a small technical whiz found out his secret.

"I do have an AI as a best friend," said Juli, shrugging.

"Information comes rather easily when one knows out to sift through a trash can."

He couldn't help but smile before waving for her to sit on the cot. He took the hard backed chair that he was meant to use with his desk. Juli took the seat gratefully, seeming to relax considerably.

"Why me?" asked Acea. "Why'd you start looking at me out of all the people in the galaxy?"

"You had the most suspicious timeline," said Juli. "And ZÃ©ro saw your picture as a young boyâ€| She thought she recognized you yesterday when you sat down to lunch across the table from me."

Acea nodded. It had been the closest he had been to the girl the entire time they had known each other. It made some amount of sense.

"And?" he prompted.

"I was born a hacker," said Juli, a smirk on her face and a glint in her eyes. It was the first time she had ever looked so assured soâ€| alive. Acea smiled again. There was more to her than he had thought. "We found your story about the Myrimidions and from there it really was just connect the dots then see if you looked at me like I was stupid orâ€| Whatever you just did."

Acea laughed. He held out a hand to the girl and she took it firmly, shaking it. "Well done. You've done what the UNSC never could. Well done both of you!"

Juli merely sighed, pulling her hand away. "I did this for ZÃ©ro. I found her on cyberspace falling to pieces, going crazyâ€| crying hysterically. I know it's strange because she's an AI but it seemed like she was really hurting. I helped her butâ€| she was created illegally, too. She shouldn't exist but I want her to belong!"

"So you found me for her," muttered Acea. "Somebody that went through the same thing as herâ€|"

"Will you please?" breathed Juli, so faint he hardly picked it up. It was the first time he noticed that the ear piece she normally had with her was missing. Acea could see that Juli was asking for something a little more than to just be the person he was claiming to be. It was more personal than that. She and that AI were closeâ€|

"I don't trust people very easily," said Acea, leaning back in his chair. "I'm sorry, Major, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave my quarters."

Her mouth thinned at once and she got to her feet shaking with fury. No words were spoke outloud but her eyes told him much. Acea almost regretted it, almost took it all backâ€| But she was gone.

MYRIMINDION-I. The Prototype. Acea.

He'd spent so much time being something other than human he had forgotten. Forgotten the emotions that were attached and left over from his first life. One of them came battering home in his stomach making it churn. Guilt.

And another one in his heart.

Loneliness.

\* \* \*

>That incosiderate, emotionless, less than human, pig-headed, super soldier bastard. Juli had half a mind to punch him in the nose, kick him in the groin, the promptly electracute him with his own effing computer! Another person was suffering and he was just going toâ€œ let her?<p><p>

Juli stormed into her room, ZÃ©ro coming to life faster than usual since she knew nothing of what happened. Her hopeful face drooped as she saw Juli's expression. Seeing this, Juli promptly kicked her door shut and threw herself down on the bed. Instead of trying to explain what happened (and making it sound better or worse than it really had been) Juli simply placed her recording disk into the computer to let ZÃ©ro watch it.

Watch it. Rewind it. Fastforward itâ€œ Delete it.

"That's was very sweet, mother," said ZÃ©ro, the hint of a laugh in her voice. "But you have to remember this guy's history. He doesn't have the luxery of a nice woman saving him after all that pain."

Juli threw her a disgusted look. Of course ZÃ©ro would take his side. But this was something for to Juli. Sure, the AI jokingly called her mother but that meant something to Juli. It meant that when ZÃéro was in pain, she had failed. The biggest pain that Juli had never actually been able to do anything about until now was in reach of being eradicatedâ€œ and the man that could help refused.

He didn't \_trust\_ her. Didn't trust a caring woman and a \_child\_. Wellâ€œ at leastâ€œ a child likeâ€œ thing.

"Alright, so what should I have done differently?" snapped Juli.

"Absolutely nothing," said ZÃéro, fading out. "Just wait."

So Juli did.

\* \* \*

>It was around midnight that ZÃéro saw what she had expected to see. Despite what Juli thought, the AI and Myrimidion were very alike. They may have both been built to ignore emotions but they were an integral part of all life, even a computer construct and cyborg. So something was bound to stir inside Acea eventually and he would come to the one person that actually <em>knew</em> something about him.

Juli.

So sue ZÃ©ro for having a crush on somebody she couldn't have and deciding to set him up with her surrogate mother. It's what all good friends do, of course.

After a few minutes somebody knocked on Juli's door and the girl, a little drowsy and disoriented, opened it without really thinking about it. There was a definite pause, however, when the girl saw who it was. ZÃ©ro sniggered.

"Can I come in?" asked Acea.

No verbal response came back but Juli stepped back and let the tall, dark man into her room. Luckily she was still in civilian clothes instead of her usual sleeping attire. The only reason why ZÃ©ro had even told Juli to wait instead of saying nothing at all. But it was fun to watch the turn of fate.

"Wh-whaâ€| why are you here?" asked Juli, half yawning, half stammering.

The man chuckled, taking a seat and allowing Juli to do the same.

"My name is Ken," he said, his eyes roving to the hologram. ZÃ©ro appeared there so there would be no more appearance of spying. Wellâ€| since he actually knew she was there. "Don't know what my last name is. Family died when I was too young for it to really matter."

"Ohâ€| ohâ€|" muttered Juli, blinking. She turned to catch ZÃ©ro's eyes who merely shrugged.

The newly renamed Ken ran a hand through his black hair.

"Listen, you two are the only people alive that know it," he said. "That means a lotâ€| don't abuse it."

"Of course not!" said Juli immediately. ZÃ©ro merely shrugged trying to portray she had been spoken for. It didn't appear Ken was really paying attention to her. She liked that at the same time she was annoyed. While she had planned for Ken to be interested in Juliâ€| she was also jealous. Oh well. It was something she would deal with.

"Thank you," said Ken, getting to his feet. He nodded to ZÃ©ro who nodded back. An attempt at connection for Juli's sake.

He walked back to the door.

"Wait!" said Juli, eyes wide. "I know you went through a lotâ€| But why do you distrust people so much?"

He paused, hand on the door. He kept his back to them before he spoke. "I've always had to do things on my own. From the moment my parents died. I lived on my own for so long before those scientists found me." At this point he paused, shuddered, swallowed hard, and then continued. "They did horrible things to me after they had gained my trust. But I still liked them. For a while I had aâ€| family in my

fellow Myrimidions. But slowly they started to die off. I decided that I couldn't trust anybody because eventually they would die and I would be alone again."

"That's horrible!" muttered Juli, her hands gripped between her knees. It was the most emotion anybody had seen out of Ken. But maybe Ken was more emotional than Acea was. Maybe!

ZÄro stopped. It didn't matter how much she resembled a human, she couldn't analyze them and pretend she knew. Ken was more human she was. Always would be. She needed to live and accept that.

Ken glanced over his shoulder. "I trust you. Don't forget that."

And before those awful words he left. Tears sprouted in Juli's eyes and she fell back on her cot, appearing to head back to sleep. But ZÄro knew she was thinking about what Ken had meant. That he cared. That he didn't want to see Juli die.

Out of everybody in the known universe ZÄro knew more than anybody that Juli would eventually die. Then Ken would be alone! ZÄro would be alone.

And the AI had already had a plan for when that day came.

\*\*AN:\*\* I did not mean to make Juli into this detective character but she's the one with the AI as a best friend! It just sort of happened! Bonus material for those of you that actually read these things: I almost decided to name Acea Cody instead which is the name of my ex-boyfriend who actually gave me the character Acea Buchanan for a novel I had to scrap. But since I just broke up with my boyfriend I named our lead male Ken instead. I quite prefer that for the guy's personality.

See you next week with an update! if I don't squeeze one out this weekend .

End  
file.